

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 OMB-01 /056 W

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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7437

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT PARA 6)

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, MY

SUBJECT: SABAH POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

REF: (A) KUALA LUMPUR 3139, (B) KUALA LUMPUR A-63, 5/20/77

1. SUMMARY. TUN MUSTAPHA WAS CONFIRMED AS PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED SABAH NATIONAL ORGANIZATION (USNO) AT ITS GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN LATE MAY, BUT PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN ONN DID NOT ATTEND THE ASSEMBLY AND DEPUTY PM MAHATHIR ON HUSSEIN'S BEHALF DELVERED SPEECH CRITICAL OF USNO'S PAST AND ADMONISHING THE PARTY TO ACCEPT ITS OPPOSITION STATUS. CONTINUED DISUNITY AMONG USNO LEADERS AND KL'S DISPLEASURE DO NOT BODE WELL FOR AN EARLY MUSTAPHA RESURRECTION. END SUMMARY.

2. THE USNO GENERAL ASSEMBLY MET MAY 29-30 IN KOTA KINABALU. PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN WAS SCHEDULED TO OPEN THE ASSEMBLY, BUT AT THE LAST MOMENT DECLINED TO TRAVEL TO KOTA KINABALU,
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PLEADING SEVERE MIGRAINE (AN AILMENT HE HAS NEVER BEEN KNOWN TO SUFFER BEFORE). DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER MAHATHIR READ HUSSEIN'S SPEECH, WHICH DECLARED THAT USNO'S DEFEAT IN THE APRIL 1976 STATE ELECTION WAS "ALAH'S WILL," AND WHICH URGED USNO TO ACCEPT ITS ROLE AS AN OPPOSITION PARTY ON THE STATE LEVEL. HUSSEIN'S SPEECH FURTHER CALLED ON USNO TO REALIZE THE MISTAKES AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PAST AND BEFORE MAKING

NEW MOVES TO "REVIEW IN DEPTH ALL ITS STRATEGIES AND STANDS SO THAT THE FAILURES AND MISFORTUNES WHICH HAD TAKEN PLACE WOULD NOT RECUR AGAIN". IT ALSO URGED THE LEADERS OF USNO AND OF THE RULING BERJAYA PARTY TO "CONCENTRATE THEIR EFFORTS AND ENERGY IN LEADING THE PEOPLE TOWARDS A BETTER LIFE, RATHER THAN QUARREL AMONG THEMSELVES."

3. AS EXPECTED (REFTEL A), USNO CONFIRMED FORMER CHIEF MINISTER TUN DATU MUSTAPHA BIN DATU HARUN AS PARTY PRESIDENT. HOWEVER, IN A TOUCH REMINISCENT OF MUSTAPHA'S HIGH-FLYING DAYS, HE WAS NOT PRESENT IN KOTA KINABALU FOR THE ASSEMBLY, BUT REPORTEDLY WAS IN LONDON "UNDERGOING MEDICAL TREATMENT." (HE RETURNED TO SABAH SEVERAL DAYS LATER.) ONE OBSERVER TOLD US, THOUGH, THAT 30-40 PERCENT OF THE ASSEMBLY AUDIENCE WAS MADE UP OF PHILIPPINE MUSLIM REFUGEES WHO, ALTHOUGH NOT EVEN MALAYSIAN CITIZENS ARE MOSTLY OF MUSTAPHA'S SULUK TRIBE AND ARE STAUNCH MUSTAPHA SUPPORTERS. MEWSAPAPER REPORTING FROM KOTA KINABALU ATTRIBUTED MUSTAPHA'S COMEBACK TO MOTIVES AS DIVERSE AS DEFUSING A POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE SITUATION IN THE PARTY (AS VARIOUS FACTIONS COMPLETED FOR LEADERSHIP), A GENUINE TO REDEEM HIS PAST MISTAKES, AND A SOURCE OF RESUPPLY FOR THE PARTY'S DWINDLING COFFERS.

4. IN A SHOW OF APPARENT UNITY WITHIN USNO, THE THREE CARETAKERS OF THE PARTY IN MUSTAPHA'S ABSENCE (AND RUMORED CHALLENGERS TO HIS COMEBACK), SAID KERUAK, DZULKIFLI HAMID AND GHANI GILONG, ALL WERE ELECTED UNOPPOSED AS PARTY VICE PRESIDENTS. HOWEVER, THERE IS EVIDENCE THINGS ARE NOT QUITE SO HARMONIOUS IN USNO'S UPPER ECHELONS, INCLUDING AN EDITORIAL IN THE USNO NEWSPAPER, THE KINABALU SABAH TIMES, WHICH SAID OF THE ASSEMBLY, " TOO MUCH LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DEMOCRACY HAS BEEN PRACTICED DURING THE LAST THREE DAYS, SO MUCH SO THAT ATTACKS AND COUNTER ATTACKS AMONG LEADERS WERE NOT UNCOMMON."

5. JUST BEFORE THE USNO ASSEMBLY BEGAN, DATU ALIUDDIN BIN DATU HARUN, USNO SECRETARY GENERAL AND MUSTAPHA'S BROTHER, DIED OF A HEART ATTACK AT AGE 47. ALIUDDIN WAS ONE OF MUSTAPHA'S RIGHTHAND MEN AND WAS MADE DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER OF SABAH IN NOVEMBER 1975 WHEN MUSTAPHA RELINQUISHED THE CHIEF MINISTERSHIP TO SAID KERUAK UNDER PRESSURE FROM KUALA LUMPUR. ALIUDDIN'S DEATH ADDS TO THE DISARRAY IN USNO'S LEADERSHIP.

6. IN A DEVELOPMENT APPARENTLY UNRELATED TO THE USNO MEETING, ON MAY 27 BERJAY MP STEPHEN ROBERT EVANS ANNOUNCED THAT HE WAS RESIGNING JUNE 1 TO ALLOW CHIEF MINISTER DATUK HARRIS SALLEH TO CONTEST HIS SEAT IN A BY-ELECTION. EVANS, WHO WAS ELECTED TO PARLIAMENT UNOPPOSED ON THE USNO TICKET IN 1974 (AS WERE ALL BUT ONE OF THE SABAH MP'S IN MUSTAPHA'S HEYDAY), AND WHO WAS THE FIRST USNO MP TO CROSS OVER TO BERJAYA AFTER THE STATE ELECTIONS

IN APRIL 1975, EXPLAINED: "ALL THE MENTRIS BESAR AND CHIEF MINISTERS OF OTHER STATES ARE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, WHILE OUR CHIEF MINISTER DATUK HARRIS IS NOT AN MP." (COMMENT: THIS IS NOT TRUE; ONLY PENANG CHIEF MINISTER LIM CHONG EU AND SARAWAK CM RAHMAN YAKUB, I.E. THE NON-UMNO AND NON-PAS CHIEF MINISTERS, ARE MP'S. WE DO NOT KNOW EXACTLY WHAT IS BEHIND THIS MOVE, BUT SPECULATE THAT HARRIS SALLEHIS SETTING HIMSELF UP FOR THE FUTURE, I.E. TO BE IN A POSITION TO ACCEPT A FEDERAL MINISTERSHIP, EITHER TO REMOVE AT LEAST ONE OBSTACLE TO A USNO-BERJAYA RECONCILIATION OR TO PROVIDE A FALLBACK SHOULD HIS OR BERJAYA'S LOCAL POLITICAL FORTUNES CHANGE.)

7. COMMENT. PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN'S FAILURE TO ATTEND THE USNO GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND THE BITING SPEECH DELIVERED ON HIS BEHALF BY THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER BOTH INDICATE KUALA LUMPUR'S IMPATIENCE WITH SABAH POLITICS IN GENERAL AND USNO IN PARTICULAR. LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DESPITE SEVERAL ATTEMPTS TO RECONCILE USNO AND BERJAYA, INCLUDING A TRIP TO SABAH IN APRIL BY HUSSEIN, THE PUBLIC SNIPING BETWEEN THE PARTIES HAS CONTINUED. WE THINK HUSSEIN'S IRE WAS DIRECTED PARTICULARLY AT USNO IN AN ATTEMPT TO DISCOURAGE MUSTAPHA FROM

USING HIS COMEBACK TO STIR UP FURTHER TROUBLE. ALSO, BERJAYA IS THE RULING PARTY IN THE STATE AND USNO HAS INITIATED MOST OF THE BICKERING. IT STILL REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHAT MUSTAPHA WILL MAKE OF HIS RETURN TO THE USNO PRESIDENCY. THE CONTINUED INFIGHTING AMONG USNO'S LEADERS, KUALA LUMPUR'S OBVIOUS DISPLEASURE WITH USNO, AND MUSTAPHA'S FAILURE TO SHOW UP AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HIS POPULAR SUPPORT TO BUILD UP HIS IMAGE ALL SAY LITTLE FOR HIS CHANCES OF MAKING A REAL COMEBACK SOON. DILLON

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Disposition Approved on Date:
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